

"King Cotton"

During the first half of the 19th Century, a single crop came to dominate the economy and politics of the South. How did this crop become "King"?

Words to watch for:

abolish reap
hybrid prominent

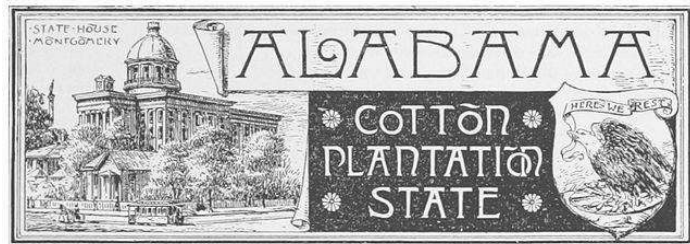
In the early days of the Republic, the South suffered from depleted soil, low wages, and an increasingly unprofitable slave system. In the years following the Revolution, some politicians in Virginia even discussed the possibility of abolishing slavery. Planters hoped for a new crop that would allow them to compete in the world market. They found it in cotton.

America produced very little cotton before the Constitutional Convention. However, after the introduction of the cotton gin in 1793, short staple cotton became highly profitable. It helped the country push westward and became the prominent crop in the Deep South, far surpassing rice, tobacco, and sugarcane. By 1820, the US was growing thirty times more cotton than before the gin was invented.

The most common plant grown in the South was Petit Gulf cotton, a hybrid mix of Mexican, Georgia, and Siamese strains. It grew exceptionally well in the Mississippi River Valley, but it also thrived in Arkansas and Texas. By the 1830s, America had become the world's leading supplier of cotton. The South produced vast amounts of the fluffy white bulbs, which some planters referred to as "white gold."

Northern shippers also reaped handsome rewards. Their vessels visited ports such as Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans, to pick up 500-pound cotton bales to deliver to the North and Great Britain.

By 1840, the United States had solidified itself as the world's chief cotton producer. The crop accounted for more than half of all US exports. In Southern port cities, every ship, brig, schooner, warehouse, and dock was packed full of "white gold."



At the time, Great Britain was the world's leading economic power, but its most important export was cotton cloth. Three-fourths of the fabric that poured from their factories came from the American South. Northern factory owners and British businessmen made great profits from cotton, but the system made them dependent on the South and the institution of slavery.

Southern planters and politicians understood that the economic success of the North and Great Britain depended on cotton. This knowledge gave Southern aristocrats a certain sense of power. They spoke of "King Cotton" in an almost spiritual sense, and they spoke of it often. One visitor to Mobile, Alabama, commented, "I believe that in the three days I was there...I must have heard the word cotton...3,000 times."

By 1850, over half of the country's 3.2 million slaves labored to produce the crop. In the decade before the Civil War, these slaves produced over two billion pounds of cotton a year. James Hammond, a politician from South Carolina, was quite confident of the Cotton Kingdom's position of power and influence. He declared that the North could never threaten the South because "Cotton is King."

Guided Reading: *Fill in the blanks below to create complete sentences.*

1. Following the Revolution, some politicians in _____ even discussed the possibility of abolishing slavery.

2. America produced very little cotton before the _____.

3. By 1820, the US was growing _____ more cotton than before the gin was invented.

4. Petit Gulf cotton grew exceptionally well in the _____ Valley, but it also thrived in other areas, such as Arkansas and Texas.

5. The South produced vast amounts of cotton, which some planters referred to as "_____."

6. By 1840, cotton accounted for more than half of all US _____.

7. At the time, _____ was the world's leading economic power, but its most important export was cotton cloth.

8. Southern planters and _____ understood that the economic success of the North and Great Britain depended on cotton.

9. Southern aristocrats spoke of "King Cotton" in an almost _____ sense, and they spoke of it often.

10. In the decade before the Civil War, Southern slaves produced over _____ pounds of cotton a year.

Multiple Choice: *Select the choice that completes the statement or answers the question.*

1. _____ In the early days of the Republic, which of the following was NOT a problem for the South?
 - a. depleted soil
 - b. political instability
 - c. low wages
 - d. an increasingly unprofitable slave system

2. _____ What type of cotton was most prominent in the Deep South?
 - a. Petit Gulf cotton
 - b. Acala cotton
 - c. Upland cotton
 - d. Pima cotton

3. _____ When did America become the world's leading supplier of cotton?
 - a. during the 1820s
 - b. during the 1830s
 - c. in the late 1850s
 - d. in 1860

4. _____ How many slaves lived in the South in 1850?
 - a. 1.5 million
 - b. 2.8 million
 - c. 3.2 million
 - d. 3.7 million

5. _____ What state did James Hammond represent in Congress?
 - a. Mississippi
 - b. Alabama
 - c. Georgia
 - d. South Carolina

Vocabulary: *Match each word with its correct definition. Consider how the word is used in the lesson. This might help you define each term. Use a dictionary to help if necessary.*

- | | |
|------------|--------------|
| a. deplete | d. hybrid |
| b. abolish | e. prominent |
| c. reap | |
-
6. _____ receive (a reward or benefit) as a consequence of one's own or other people's actions

 7. _____ formally put an end to (a system, practice, or institution)

 8. _____ important; famous

 9. _____ use up the supply or resources of

 10. _____ the offspring of two plants or animals of different species or varieties

Summarize: *Answer the following questions in the space provided. Attempt to respond in a complete sentence for each question. Be sure to use correct capitalization and punctuation!*

1) Who declared that the North could never threaten the South?

2) What type of cotton became highly profitable in the South?

3) When was the cotton gin invented?

4) Where did most of the South's cotton get shipped to?

5) Why did cotton become highly profitable?

6) How much did the giant bales of cotton weigh?

Student Response: *Write a paragraph addressing the questions raised below. A thorough response should consist of at least five complete sentences.*

7. What likely caused Southern politicians to grow so confident about the South's position of power and influence? What type of attitude is reflected in James Hammond's quote?